

The book cover features a woman with long blonde hair, her head tilted back and eyes closed, with a soft, ethereal glow on her face. The background is dark and moody, with some faint, leafy patterns. The text is overlaid on the image.

Mardi Gras Publishing Presents...

**In
The
Moonlight**

Sherri Good

Mardi Gras Publishing, LLC

133 Lake Front Dr. #204

Daphne, AL 36526

This is a work of fiction. Names, places, characters and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any actual persons, living or dead, organizations, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

ISBN-13 978-1-934329-48-1 ISBN-10 1-934329-48-7

In the Moonlight © Sherri Good

All rights reserved under the International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Cover art © 2006 Skylar Sinclair

For more variety in your reading selection, please visit
www.mardigraspublishing.com

In the Moonlight

by

Sherri Good

DEDICATION

To Pennie, my muse, this book would never have been possible without your constant guidance. I can never thank you enough.

To my family for giving me peace and the time to write this book.

I love you all beyond words.

Forward: Based on Greek Mythology

According to Greek Mythology in the beginning, there were three parents: Sun, Moon and Earth, each producing offspring, round like itself. Humans were once beings with four arms, four legs, and a single head but with two faces, one facing forward and the other facing backward. The sun produced man; from earth, the woman; from the moon, the androgyny. They were quicker and stronger with a lot more freedom and power than humans today.

One day the humans attempted to scale Mt. Olympus and attack the gods. The Greek god Zeus, the ruler of Mount Olympus, and god of sky and thunder knew they had to be punished deciding that destroying them would destroy their worshipers; they had to come up with another way to punish the humans.

Thinking if the humans lost their speed, strength and confidence, their arrogance would be in check. Zeus decided that if they were cut in half they would be only half of what they once were.

Zeus asked Apollo to help him in his plan. Zeus cut the humans in half and Apollo made the necessary repairs. The backward face, Apollo turned to face the front. Then he pulled all the skin around the cut together with an opening in the middle, creating the belly button, as a reminder of man's beginning. Thus, rendering each half to an eternity of searching for their soulmate or other half.

Do you believe in soulmates?

Prologue

Fall of 1981

The firelight flickered across the faces of the six couples gathered around. The shadows of the grove hovered around them in the clearing. The women were ready to get on with it, but the men did not want to be there, claiming the women were interfering with Fate.

With a very unladylike snort, Roberta Compton, known as Robbie to her family and very close friends, replied, "We are just *helping* fate not interfering." The other women nodded in agreement.

"Fate may not see it that way, as you well know," Corrado Giordano said sternly to his wife Alessandra. Their friends called them Cordy and Sandy. His Italian accent was very pronounced, and he was getting more nervous by the minute. He did not like tempting fate, not one bit.

"You know very well that we are only trying to look out for our children," Mrs. James said as she eyed her husband. "The ritual only helps them make good choices until they find their soulmate. It does not designate or pick their soulmate for them."

As the women glanced at each other, the men backed away from the circle. They wanted nothing to do with what their wives were about to do. The women gathered closer to the fire in preparation to begin the ritual to help their children in finding their soulmates when the time was right.

Robbie Compton, Mary James, Rose Wright, Jan Allen, and Alena Williams took their places as Sandy Giordano prepared to begin the ritual. Each one believing that they were doing the right thing for their children.

Unbeknownst to the women their children's souls had already found their one true mate. Even as infants and young children, their souls already knew who was part of who.

Chapter 1

Cleo heard Janet ask a customer, “Hey, what can I get ya?” as she made her way down the long mahogany bar to the stranger at the end. He had been watching her for some time. There was something about him that made her legs weak. There was something vaguely familiar about him too, but she couldn’t think of where she’d met him.

“Hi, I’m Cleo. What can I get ya?” She smiled as she approached him. The man did not say a word for the longest time. He just sat staring at her as if he could look at her all night long. Cleo realized that every nerve in her body was buzzing, that something in him pulled to her.

Cleo learned very fast to follow her gut feelings, or as some called it her intuition, especially here at the club, The Lair, where she worked. They had all sorts show up here.

She noticed he was a beautiful example of the male species. The moving strobe lights in the club were casting deep blue highlights off his jet-black hair that hung just past his shoulders. Cleo stared back at the gorgeous stranger thinking, *“I’d love to have my hands tangled in that hair.”* His eyes were dark but she couldn’t tell what color they were for sure. His chest looked like one you could snuggle into and want to stay there forever. He had shoulders to rival the great Atlas himself. His arms were muscular and looked as if they should be wrapped around someone, like *her*. *“I’d love to feel all that wrapped around me.”* He had a strong jaw with just the hint of a

five o'clock shadow starting. All Cleo could think of was running her tongue along that jaw all the way to his ear.

Catching herself, Cleo shook her head. *"Where did that come from!? You've seen him for about five minutes total and you are already thinking about him as if he's some sort of sex object. DAMN, he is fine though. GET A GRIP!"*

"Mister?" she said to get his attention.

"Scotch on the rocks and I am Cyrus Giordano, the new manager."

She noticed that he had a slight Italian accent. *"Cleo, pick up your chin, it's sittin' on the floor! Get a hold of yourself woman, you're acting like a star struck teenager!"* Cleo swallowed past the dryness in her throat. "Coming right up, Boss." Cleo mentally slapped herself, *"Never good to start out with sarcasm, Cleo."*

Janet caught her by the elbow as she was pouring his scotch. "Who is that fine piece of, OH SO LICKABLE, male flesh?" Janet asked as she watched him out the corner of her eye.

"Stop droolin' babe, that's the new boss," Cleo warned her.

As Cleo sat the scotch down in front of Cyrus, he leaned in and told her, "Take a break, we need to talk."

"Okay, just one minute. I have to let Janet know." Cleo walked back to Janet and said, "Cover for me, the new boss says we need to talk."

"About what? He can't have a complaint already can he?" Janet started to worry their jobs may not be as stable as she thought ten minutes earlier. She for one needed this job to stay out from under Daddy's thumb.

Cleo shrugged her shoulders as she answered Janet's questions the best she could. "I don't think it's anything like that. If anything, it's about me. He's been keeping his eye on me since he sat down."

"No problem, Cleo. We aren't busy yet. Just don't take all night," Janet replied as she flashed Cleo a grin.

"HA, HA, very funny Janet, quite the comedienne tonight, aren't you."

Cleo followed Cyrus to the office, soaking in his six foot five inch body. Her eyes were quickly drawn to his lusciously toned ass. His black Armani slacks were clinging to all the right places. *"What I wouldn't give to be those slacks just for a little while,"* thought Cleo as she felt a shiver travel down her spine.

Once they were in his office, he shut the door and motioned for her to take a seat. When he moved around the desk and sat down, Cleo noticed just how handsome he actually was. Finally, she could tell that his eyes were like dark Italian chocolate.

Cleo could not get the thought of licking her new boss' jaw out of her head. Catching herself, she tried to shake it out. *"What are you thinking? I'm thinking I need to have some no strings attached sex before I make a bigger ass of myself."*

In the small office, his scent began to fill Cleo's head. He smelled of the deep forest and spice. She began to feel the fluttering of a thousand tiny butterfly wings low in her abdomen, which was not a totally unwelcome feeling. She held herself very still not wanting him to see her squirm.

The deep steady cadence of his voice brought her out of her self-examination. "Let me start by saying that everything is going to continue to run just as it is. I have no intention of changing how things are working here." Cyrus began to wonder if she was even paying attention to him.

Cleo cleared her throat. "Good, that should make things easier on everyone."

Now that he knew she was listening, Cyrus continued. "I was told you know everyone who works here. I need to know a little background on everyone. Can you help me out with that?"

Cleo was starting to get a little antsy now. *"What could he want to know that isn't already in the personnel files?"*

As if he had read her mind, he added, "I just want to know a little about their personalities, their likes, dislikes, quirks, things like that."

Cleo began by talking about Joseph Williams and Max Wright, two of the bouncers. "We call Joseph 'Muscle'. He is usually pretty easy going until someone

screws up or Jared Braden shows up. Joseph hates him, so it is usually a tense night when Jared is here. Max, we call him 'More Muscle' because, of course, he has more muscle than Joseph. He doesn't take any shit from anyone. He can usually keep Joseph in line on the nights Jared is here."

Cyrus interrupted, "Why does Joseph hate this Jared Braden?"

"No one knows. He won't talk about it. We've all tried to get him to tell us but he won't. Janet Compton is a hellcat when someone pisses her off, so I suggest you don't piss her off. Other than that, she is a barrel of laughs. Lisa Allen, the blonde waitress who looks like she should be a cross-country runner, is a lot like Janet. We all hate liars so don't lie to any of us and all should go well." Cleo went on to tell him about the rest of the staff. "We all pretty much stick together, and that's pretty much it on us. Is that all you needed? I really need to get back to work; we'll be getting busy if we aren't already."

"Well there is one person you left out," Cyrus pointed out.

"Whom?" she couldn't think of anyone she'd left out.

"You. What about you, Ms. James?" he asked.

With a small laugh she said, "It's Cleo. There isn't really anything to tell. What you see is what you get. Don't piss me off and we should be okay."

"Straight to the point, I like that," Cyrus said with a slight grin.

"Try to be, it's just easier that way. No games, just straight up honesty. Speaking of honesty, I need to get back out there before Janet gets ticked at me. And believe me when I say, been there, done that, and would rather not repeat it." Cleo moved toward the door. She turned to him before she opened it. "Can I ask you a question?" He nodded. "Have we met somewhere before?"

"I do not believe so. I don't think I would forget meeting you."

After Cleo left the office, Cyrus drew in a deep breath, inhaling her scent as if he couldn't get enough. "Heather and the fresh, clean smell of rain," he whispered to the empty room as he smiled.

Janet was slammed by the time Cleo made it back to the bar. Joseph was helping out as much as he could with having to keep an eye on the crowd. "He'd better have been damn good for as long as you were gone!" Janet yelled over the crowd.

"Shut up, Janet! He just wanted to let us know that he wasn't going to change the way things are running around here. He also wanted to know a little bit more about everyone. I just told him not to piss us off and everything should be okay," Cleo said as she got back to work.

"You didn't really say it to him like that did you? Oh man, never mind, I know you said it just like that. Get back to work, Cleo," Janet said as both girls broke out laughing.

Everything had been running smoothly all night. That is until Cleo and Janet heard Joseph cursing at the end of the bar, "SON OF A BITCH! Can't that asshole take a hint and stay away from here?"

The girls looked at each other, shook their heads and said in unison, "Jared."

Jared Braden was a tall, solid, blonde-haired, blue-eyed playboy. He had a golden tan complexion that had almost all the girls falling at his feet. He looked like he should have been surfing in California instead of here in Seattle annoying everyone. He was a living Adonis, until he opened his mouth that is. When he looked at you, there was something not quite right about his eyes. Almost as if there was something evil lurking behind them that makes your skin crawl. Not far behind him were his asinine buddies Mick, Leo, Fulk and Drake. Drake wasn't all-bad, he seemed to like Lisa and he was nice to her. She definitely liked him.

Cleo cringed when she saw Jared making his way towards the bar.

"Hey Cleo, when are you going to let me take you out on the town?" Jared asked, as he slithered up to the bar.

"When hell freezes over, thaws and refreezes," Joseph sneered.

Jared ignored him, which thoroughly irritated the hell out of the six foot five inch bouncer. "Come on Cleo, let me take you out, I promise to show you a great time," Jared purred.

"You were already given an answer. Now order a drink or get lost, wolf boy," Janet ground out between her clenched teeth. She knew Jared was a sleazy, no-good bastard.

No one saw Cyrus walk up behind Jared, but Cleo and Janet did. Jared nearly jumped out of his sleazy skin when he heard Cyrus. "Cleo, I need to see you in my office. Now," Cyrus growled as he looked down at Jared.

Cleo left the group standing at the bar staring after her. Everyone looked at each other and shrugged, none of them knew what was going on.

When they got to the office, Cyrus slammed the door, making Cleo jump. She turned to Cyrus and saw that he was grinning like the Cheshire cat. "I thought you might need a break from Prince Charming out there. Please take a seat," he laughed.

Cleo laughed more for stress relief than anything else. "Yeah, thanks but I'm used to it. He's been at it for so long I don't even bother listening anymore."

A furrow found its way into Cyrus' forehead. "Does he come in here often? Is he always that charming?" Cyrus asked sarcastically.

"Often enough to be annoying and yes, he is always that charming," Cleo answered, matching his sarcasm. *"Why does it matter to him? This man is definitely up to something. Just what, I don't know. YET."*

"Do you want me to see if the coast is clear?" Cyrus asked. "I could find an excuse to throw him out."

"Don't bother. The coast won't be clear until closing time when the place clears out. He isn't worth the trouble anyway," Cleo replied gloomily. "Joseph will stick close by. He's just waiting for a reason to pound on Jared."

Cyrus shrugged as he walked to the door. "I think I'm beginning to share that feeling. If he bothers you too much let me know and I'll take care of it." Cyrus held

the door for her. He stayed by the door so she would have to touch him on her way out. He took a deep breath as she went by. *"Heather and rain. A man could get used to waking up to that scent every morning."*

Cleo noticed his right eyelid twitch as her shoulder brushed his chest on her way out. Grinning she thought, *"HMMMMMM...I wonder what he'd do if I just happened to fall into him? OH! GET A GRIP, CLEO!"*

"Thanks for the reprieve from Prince Charming, Mr. Giordano," Cleo said, giving him a small smile.

"Anytime, and it is Cyrus." Cyrus slowly shut the office door as Cleo walked back to the bar. He never once took his eyes off her toned body, drinking in all her curves. She looked damn good in her tight fitting "The Lair" t-shirt and skin-tight black leather pants. *"Easy boy, you are going to scare her off. She is already suspicious of you,"* he said to himself as the door finally clicked shut.

Cleo could feel his eyes following her all the way down the hallway back to the bar. She swayed her hips a little bit extra just for effect. *"What is with that man? He's starting to get under my skin,"* Cleo thought to herself and grinned.

Lisa met Cleo at the bar. "Hey Cleo, where have you been, certainly not hiding from Jared?" She was inquisitive as she waited for her answer never taking her eyes off Drake seated across the room.

"Do you realize you haven't even looked at me? Can't you take your eyes off him for two seconds? Go talk to him, at least go see if he needs anything." Cleo motioned for her to go. "Go for it girl."

"Oh, I almost forgot the order for table four. I need a Long Island Ice Tea and a beer," she added over her shoulder as she made a beeline straight for Drake.

Cleo didn't understand what Lisa saw in him. He was a fine looking man, but he definitely lacked common sense when it came to picking who he chose to run with. Jared Braden was a friend only as long as he could use you for something. The man did not know what it meant to be a friend, or anything else for that matter.

She hoped Drake was different, for Lisa's sake. Something about Jared was rubbing her the wrong way tonight, if they were lucky, he would leave at closing time without any trouble. She figured that wasn't going to happen tonight though. She hoped Lisa would be able to keep Drake busy and out of any trouble, Jared had planned.

She didn't realize she had been holding her breath until the last call bell rang out over the club. Her lungs burned as she exhaled, then she got that rock in her gut that told her the night was not going to end on a pleasant note. *"What are you up to, Jared?"* Cleo wondered to herself as she felt his eyes on her. Her skin was crawling and she knew something bad was going to happen before the night was over. Her eyes scanned what was left of the crowd looking for Jared's buddies. *"Good, Drake is still with Lisa, but where are the other three meatheads? What do you have planned tonight, Jared?"*

Cleo was only half listening to Joseph telling her that she couldn't leave the club alone tonight. She couldn't help it. She saw Cyrus leave his office and couldn't take her eyes off him as he headed towards her. She wondered what it would feel like as his gloriously naked body pressed down on hers, taking her in long, slow thrusts and...*"Knock it off! Are you losing your mind?"* She was seriously beginning to question her sanity.

"Cleo, are you even listening to me?" Joseph growled.

"Yeah sure, I won't leave by myself," she said, faintly. However, Cleo wasn't paying as much attention as she knew she should have been. She could not seem to get Cyrus Giordano out of her mind. She was slowly losing what control she had when he was around, and that scared her. Cleo wasn't one for losing control. She prided herself on her control in all areas of her life.

Cleo noticed Jared as the last of the crowd slowly filtered out of the club. He caught her eye and gave her one of his smarmy winks, making her blood run cold. Somehow, Cyrus had managed to get up behind her while her attention was on Jared. He followed her gaze to Jared and placed his hands tenderly but firmly on

her hips. Cleo shivered as she began to feel the butterflies start fluttering low in her abdomen again. She also noticed the dampness grow between her legs. She could see Jared's nostrils flare as he stormed out.

She stepped out of Cyrus' reach, two of the most agonizing steps she'd ever taken in her life. His hands felt too good, even calming and right, oh so right, like they were meant to be there. *"Here you go again, Cleo. You're going to have to bring several changes of underwear to work every night if you keep this up. GET A GRIP!"* Get a grip was starting to be her constant mantra around Cyrus Giordano.

Joseph was on her again about leaving the bar alone when Cyrus interrupted. "She will not be leaving by herself. She will be leaving with me."

Cleo turned with a look of complete shock on her face. "Oh really, and just what makes you so sure I'm leaving with you? If you haven't noticed I am an adult and can get myself home."

"Because, I said so." The look on Cyrus' face told her he was not going to listen to anything she said. Then his face slowly melted into a, devil-may-care, grin. Cleo's heart stopped beating and then started again like a sledgehammer beating the inside of her ribcage. Every time he smiled or was even close to her she could feel her nerves buzz.

Max jumped in before Cleo could get her mouth opened. "No one is leaving here alone tonight, we're all leaving together!" Max looked like he wanted to tear someone's head off. Cleo just hoped it was Jared's head he was aiming for.

As they headed for the door, Cyrus pulled Cleo to him and kept his hand firmly clamped on her wrist. Cleo almost let a sigh escape before she tightly clamped it down. "Come on guys, you're over reacting. Jared isn't going to try anything. He is just being his usual pain-in-the-ass self," she said, as she scanned the area of the parking lot she could see through the doors of the club. However, a little voice in her head told her she was wrong.

Max went out first with Cyrus, Cleo and Joseph right behind. Janet walked out behind Cleo watching the parking lot and the shadows around them. Janet wondered where he was. She knew he was there, she just couldn't see him, yet.

Chapter 2

Jared knew he couldn't do anything inside without bringing on a lot of unwanted trouble. He'd just have to be patient (something he wasn't) and wait until Cleo left the place. Once she was outside, he could do what he wanted.

The Lair was a nightclub set back in a clearing in the woods far from the city. There was no way any one could stumble upon it. Not a lot of people knew of the place, only those trusted enough by one of the many who frequented The Lair were told its location. It was a place they could come to and unwind, relax and just have fun without the threat of fighting. There was plenty of fun, dancing, billiards and sitting having a drink with old friends and new ones.

The place was considered neutral territory for everyone. There was a sign posted above the bar that read, "NO BITING." It's like the no swimming signs you see at a place where you'd really like to go swimming. God knows he'd really love to bite Cleo, and do a few other things he couldn't quite put into words. Those who come here know to leave their attitudes and any weapons they may carry at the door. If anyone would be stupid enough to ignore the rules, Joseph and Max would take care of them and that was never pretty.

He had Mick, Leo and Fulk set up in case those friends of hers were on guard duty, which they usually were when he was around. He'd also have to find Drake later and find out where the hell he'd been. He wished he could get rid of them without anyone really noticing but he knew there was no way of doing that. He'd just have to figure out how to go around them or through them. He voted for the

latter. Jared didn't know it yet but Drake had snuck Lisa out the back for a little alone time and to keep her out of trouble.

"What is up with this new guy? If he thinks he is moving in on what's mine, he has another thing coming," Jared fumed at Fulk.

Fulk just looked at him and shrugged.

Leo made his way over to Jared and Fulk. "They're leaving, but they look like a damn guard unit. Max and Joe are out front with the rest of them following. That manager and Cleo are in the middle and he doesn't look like he is just going to hand her over to you," Leo reported to Jared.

Jared thought to himself, *"Good, now maybe I'll get my wish. I'll love going through them, especially Cyrus Giordano. Hell, if any of them actually knew who Cleo was and the power she held, they'd already be using her to their advantage."* He sent Leo back to his hiding place near Cleo's car. Now he just had to wait for them to get farther away from the club and start to break up, heading for their own cars.

Fulk thought Jared was going to foam at the mouth when he noticed Cyrus taking Cleo to his car instead of hers.

"Oh, hell no! If he thinks he is taking her to his house he's dead wrong." Jared shot up from his hiding place and headed toward his car. He'd have to follow them and get Cleo when they got where ever they were going.

* * * *

When the group started to leave the club, Janet held back to follow them out. She was watching Cyrus and Cleo with a gleam in her eye that said she knew something no one else did. *"They are soulmates, and no one else notices. Guys are such idiots. Now all I have to do is get Cleo to see it."* That was not going to be easy. *"Too bad Jared can't see it. Maybe then he'd go away. Not bloody likely!"*

When they got outside, Cleo's stomach dropped and she tensed up. Cyrus pulled her into his side and held her close. She could sense Jared was close. "He's close by," she whispered to Cyrus.

"I know," he stated calmly. "He is not going to get near you, trust me. I am sure your friends are not going to let him get anywhere near you either."

Cleo tightened her grip on Cyrus' arm and slid her other arm around his waist. She didn't even realize she had reached for him until her arm was already around him. Cyrus gave her a slight squeeze to reassure her he wasn't letting go. What he didn't tell her was that he didn't have any intentions of letting her go ever again.

Janet watched Cyrus with Cleo and secretly smiled to herself. "*FINALLY! Now all I have to do is convince them they were made for each other.*" That will be easier said than done, at least with Cleo.

Joseph caught Janet's smile. "What are you grinning about now, Janet?"

"Nothing I can mention just yet. I'm sure you'll figure it out before they do." Motioning toward Cleo and Cyrus, Janet giggled.

Joseph just shook his head. "Whatever, Janet." Then he caught what she was looking at. With eyes the size of saucers he looked at Janet and mouthed "*Soulmates?*" Joseph certainly hoped so, that way he could report to DeVane Securities that Cleo may have found her soulmate and he could stop watching her so close.

Janet just rolled her eyes, grinning and nodded a yes at Joseph. Janet seemed to have a sixth sense when it came to everyone else's mate. Too bad she couldn't seem to find her own.

Cleo glanced around the parking lot and then up at Cyrus when she realized they weren't going to her car. "I do have my own car you know. I really am capable of driving myself." She didn't know how much longer she could be this close to him and keep herself from pouncing on him.

"Shhh, I know. If you will look over at your car, you will see Joseph is going to take it home for you. You can trust me Cleo; nothing is going to happen to you. I

am just going to drive you home so that way we know you get there without any further interference from Jared.” Cyrus unlocked his black BMW and opened her door for her.

Cleo hesitated for a minute. “I could just ride with Joseph. That way you don’t have to go out of your way. I can call you when I get there and let you know everything is okay.” She realized she really didn’t want to drive home alone or with Joseph.

“I am taking you home. I told you I would not let anything happen to you and I meant it. Now, end of discussion. Get in the car, Cleo.” Cyrus gave her a smile that promised a lot more if she wanted it.

God help her, she did want a lot more.

No one noticed the gray Ford Explorer following a few cars behind. Jared followed them for a couple of miles before he realized they were going to Cleo’s so he turned off and went around to park behind her house. He’d wait until she turned out the lights to go to bed then he would go get her.

Cleo turned to Cyrus as they pulled into her driveway. “Thanks, for the ride, I should be all right from here.” She turned back to reach for the door.

Cyrus laid his hand on her arm, lightly and squeezed. “Please, wait.” He practically jumped from the car. The next thing she knew he had pulled open her door and offered her his arm. “Before you even say anything, just let me walk you to your door and make sure Jared is not anywhere around.”

She accepted the offer but not for the reason he offered. She wasn’t quite ready to leave his company yet.

* * * *

Jared began to seethe as he watched Cyrus walk Cleo to her house from the woods that lined the side of her property. He was going to show Cleo what happened to women who tried to turn him down, and he was going to do it

tonight. He didn't care if he had to go through Cyrus to do it. He was actually hoping he would have to. Beating the shit out of her new hero would go a long way to making him feel a lot better.

* * * *

Cyrus made Cleo stay outside so he could check her house before he let her go in. "If Jared was going to do something, he'd have done it by now. He isn't well known for his patience," she told Cyrus.

"I just feel better knowing I checked," Cyrus said smiling at her. He took her hand in his and raised it to his lips, brushing his lips across her smooth, warm skin. A shiver ran down Cleo's spine and settled snugly between her legs. Cleo shifted her weight, trying to reduce the tingling in her clit, but only ended up making things worse. Cyrus looked in Cleo's eyes and noticed the slightest glaze starting. He gave her a small knowing grin. Then he noticed the blush slowly rising in her cheeks. He could not help himself and gave her a full smile. "I'll be going now so you can get some rest. I will see you tomorrow."

Cleo had to look away before she fell into his arms and made a bigger fool of herself than she already had. Between his lips, that grin and that incredible accent she was lost. "Yeah, tomorrow..." was all she could manage to say. She led him back to the door and thanked him again for bringing her home.

Cleo watched him as he pulled out of her driveway. She made sure she locked the door once he was gone. She knew Jared wasn't far away and didn't want to give him a chance to just walk right in.

Cyrus scanned the area around Cleo's home. "Where are you Jared? I know you are around here somewhere. I can smell your cheap cologne." He stopped Joseph and Max, telling them, "Watch for Jared. I can smell his cheap cologne and I figure he is going to try something when he thinks we are all gone."

Max looked around as he thought about what Cyrus said. "We'll cruise around the block and see if we can spot his truck." With that said, Max and Joseph climbed back into Max's Navigator and headed toward the end of the street.

Cyrus decided to act as if he was leaving and pulled away from Cleo's house. He pulled over a few houses down and waited to see what Jared would do.

* * * *

"Finally. What the hell were they doing?" Jared growled as he watched Cyrus pull out of Cleo's driveway. Slowly he crept from the woods. He saw her turn on her stereo as he jimmied her back door open. He stayed to the shadows; the only light in the house was coming from a small lamp over by her stereo. His hard-on began to throb as he watched Cleo begin to dance around her living room. He waited until she was within arms reach of where he was hiding before he jumped up and grabbed her around her waist, grinding his rock hard cock against her ass. "I've been waiting for this moment all night," he whispered in her ear.

The minute Jared grabbed her, Cleo froze. There was no way this was happening. "Jared, what are you doing?" She knew she couldn't fight him; she needed to relax and think. She needed to figure out how to get control of the situation before it went any further.

"I'm doing just what I've wanted to do since I first saw you. I'm tired of waiting on you, sweetheart. I want you and you will be mine. I'll make sure no one but me ever touches you again," he growled against her neck.

His hands were touching her everywhere. The minute his hand reached down between her legs, Cleo started screaming and began to fight him. The thought of him touching her anywhere intimate made her skin crawl, and as she was about to lose the fight, Cyrus came slamming through her front door.

Jared jerked up and threw her to the floor behind him. "Is this your hero come to save you, Cleo?" He lunged at Cyrus just as Max and Joseph came storming in the back. Before Jared could reach Cyrus, Max and Joseph grabbed him.

Cyrus rushed over to help Cleo up off the floor and to make sure she was not physically hurt. As Cleo watched the guys drag Jared out her door, she turned to Cyrus and asked how he knew Jared was there.

"I could smell his cheap aftershave when I got outside and headed to my car. I am so sorry. I should have known he would not waste any time getting to you."

Cleo's resolve to stay strong melted at that moment. She collapsed into his arms and started to cry.

Cyrus wrapped his arms around her and held her tight. He rested his cheek on the top of her head and stroked her hair murmuring reassurances to her that Jared was gone and that she was all right. He held her like that for awhile, unfortunately, not long enough for him. He finally got her to move over to the sofa and to sit, never letting go of her. He knew if he did, she would retreat from him, body and mind. He was not quite ready for that to happen just yet.

Cleo sat there clinging to him. She felt that if she let go of him she would drown. "Thanks for rescuing the damsel again and sorry for crying all over you. There's been a lot going on and Jared was the last thing I needed tonight."

Cyrus just gave a little shrug. "No thanks needed, and those little tears are not going to make me melt." She could feel him smile where his cheek rested against the top of her head.

"I guess I should peel myself off you so you can go home and get some sleep." Cleo hoped he would offer to stay. "*Why do I feel so safe with this man? I don't even know him.*" Something deep inside was whispering to her that she did know him and that she was safe.

"I can stay here on your sofa if that would make you feel safer." Cyrus hoped she would tell him to stay.

“Thanks for the offer, I appreciate it. You can stay here on the sofa if you don’t mind sharing it with me. I think I’m too exhausted to move.”

Then, Cleo took the chance and looked up at him. He was looking at her with one corner of his lips pulled up into the sexiest lop-sided grin she had ever seen. Before she knew what happened, he’d bent down and lightly brushed his lips against hers and whispered, “Good night.”

Cyrus stretched them out on the sofa, making sure to keep her wrapped in his arms. He covered them with the quilt that was strewn across the back of the sofa. She finally relaxed enough to fall asleep around 4 a.m. Cyrus smiled and fell asleep with her scent of heather and rain filling his head.

Chapter 3

Cleo woke up to her head lightly bobbing on a warm, muscular chest and a sexy rumble of laughter in her ear. *"A woman could get used to this! OH NO YOU DON'T! You are not starting this again today, Cleo."*

"What is...OH!" is all that came out when she felt his long hard cock throb against her thigh. She was trying to figure out how she had gone from laying beside him to being on top of him.

Cyrus laughed harder and had a slight blush high on his cheeks. "That isn't what I'm laughing about. Open your eyes," he whispered to her as he looked across the room.

When she turned her head to look at what Cyrus was talking about, there standing in the middle of her living room were Lisa, Janet, Max and Joseph. "You could have knocked first," she growled. "What are you fools grinning at, you look like four escaped mental patients. Go make yourselves useful and get some coffee started."

"Janet already started it," Joseph said, sounding a little too amused by the situation.

"Well then go fix my back door. I'm sure between the four of you there's enough brain power to fix it."

Max grinned and told her, "I've already called someone about it. They'll be here in a couple of hours."

"Then why in hell are you still here?" Cleo muttered.

"Just admiring the view." They all said at once and burst out laughing.

"This situation wasn't created for your viewing pleasure. Disappear. You guys know very well I don't do mornings," Cleo scowled at them. "Why aren't you leaving?"

"It's not morning Cleo it's two o'clock in the afternoon," laughed Lisa.

"What!?" Cleo started to get up but Cyrus held her in place. When she looked at him, she remembered his not so little problem. "Sorry," she whispered to him. "Guys get lost for awhile I need to talk to Cyrus. *ALONE*."

"Sure, whatever you say kiddo," grinned Max. "Come on guys it's time to get out of here, we can razz her later." He winked at her as he ushered the others out the door.

"Thanks a lot, Max, and don't think they aren't going to get their digs in on you, too," she said to Cyrus as she poked his ribs, which made him jump and rub his hard-on into her.

After everyone was gone, Cleo jumped up. "If you want to take a shower, the bathroom is down the hall second door on the left. Do you want a cup of coffee when you're finished?" Cleo didn't wait for an answer as she headed for the kitchen to get some coffee.

Cleo heard the front door close as she was starting the coffee. "Cyrus?" There was no answer. As she made her way to the living room, he was coming in the door with an overnight bag. "Are you always prepared for the morning after you rescue damsels in distress?" Cleo asked him as she looked at his duffle bag.

Cyrus laughed. "I keep a bag in the trunk just in case I have to rush out of town or the car breaks down somewhere. Just consider this my emergency kit."

"Don't use all the hot water, please. The towels are in the cabinet next to the shower."

He came out about ten minutes later in a skintight black shirt that showed off every well-defined muscle in his torso and tight black jeans with the sharpest black boots she had ever seen. "Do you own anything that isn't black?" Not that he

looked bad in black, actually he looked damn fine in black but a little variety never hurt anyone.

"I have a few things, but I prefer black. Why, don't you like it?" Cyrus threw his still damp hair over his shoulder and gave her that sexy lop-sided grin again.

"You look fine, hell more than fine in black, but it would be nice to see some color. Hell, your car is even black. I suppose your house is decorated in shades of black as well," she laughed at the thought of an all black living room.

"My home is not decorated in shades of black," he replied with a smile on his face.

Cyrus moved in to get his cup of coffee and asked, "How are you this morning, scratch that, this afternoon?"

"Let's table that conversation for now. I need to get a shower. Make yourself at home; it should only take me about fifteen minutes." Cleo headed for the shower.

Roaming around Cleo's kitchen, Cyrus noticed she did not keep much food on hand, so he called Giovanni's for take out. Cleo came out as the delivery guy was ringing the doorbell. "I believe that is for me." Cyrus walked over to answer the door. "Are you hungry? I hope you like Italian, I called Giovanni's for take out. It is not as good as my mother makes but it is close."

"I love it."

Cyrus came into the kitchen carrying four bags of take out. "I did not know what you liked so I ordered several different things."

"I think you ordered plenty. What are you planning on doing with all this?" Cleo looked out the window. "The guys can help eat it all; they just pulled in the driveway. Oh, and look they brought pizza; guess all the bases are covered. They must not be able to get enough of me," she laughed as she headed towards the door to let them in.

"They are not the only ones."

"What was that?" Cleo asked as she opened the door.

"Nothing, just talking to myself," he grinned and shook his head.

The gang brought the pizza in. "Well, don't we look all cozy and right at home," Janet giggled. Cyrus and Janet shared a private hopeful look.

"Janet, don't get started, you never know when to leave things alone." Cleo gave her one of her patented "*shut up*" looks.

Janet nodded and walked into the kitchen. "Oh, eggplant parmigiana. Do you mind?"

"Not at all, help yourself." Cyrus handed her a glass of wine.

"Thanks. How is she today?" Janet watched Cleo with a worried frown on her face as she took a bite of the eggplant parmigiana.

"I have no idea. I tried to talk to her earlier but she put me off and took a shower. I didn't have a chance to ask her again before the food came and then you arrived."

"She'll probably avoid it every time she's asked about it. She tends to bury things instead of dealing with them."

"Why?"

"Fear, I think. She's afraid of actually depending on someone other than herself."

"You guys all seem to be really close," Cyrus stated, watching the rest of the gang with Cleo.

"Not really, she doesn't totally open up to any of us either. Max is probably the only one who really understands her, but that's because she grew up as a part of his family. She doesn't even confide in him all that much. She keeps those walls up pretty securely."

Cyrus was lost in thought while Janet finished eating. "*How am I going to get her to trust me?*" He watched Cleo; realizing she was holding herself back, not really allowing herself to join in completely.

Cleo could feel Cyrus watching her. She looked up at him and smiled. She hoped Janet wasn't trying to talk him into anything, like pursuing a relationship. She wasn't even remotely capable of holding a relationship together right now.

"Relationships aren't one-sided. It takes two to keep them afloat." Cleo closed off the little section of her mind that kept throwing logic at her.

Cyrus was the first to look away, after flashing her that sexy lop-sided grin he knew got her attention. Turning to Janet he asked, "What do I do?"

"Just keep doing what you're doing. She seems to like you. Use it against her. Don't try to be sneaky, or play any games, she'll catch on. She's a smart girl, I hope." Janet gave Cyrus one of her mischievous grins.

Cleo kept watching Cyrus and Janet in the kitchen. She was beginning to get a bad feeling in her gut; jealousy was starting to rear its ugly head. *"What the hell? I am not jealous of Janet. This is insane, I'm losing my mind that is all there is to it."* Cleo turned back to Max and Joseph and asked what they did to Jared the previous night.

"Hopefully we beat some sense into him," growled Max. "If he comes around you again I'll kill him, and I told him as much."

"You have to beat me to him first. I've owed that son of a bitch for too long, and I think it's time for a lot of payback." Joseph leaned over and gave Cleo a hug, which of course she shrugged off.

"Sorry Cleo. I wasn't thinking."

"Not a problem Joey, just didn't want you to get any ideas," she winked at him, knowing he hated the name Joey.

"It's Joseph and you know it, *Thumper*." Cleo punched him in the arm. He knew she hated that nickname.

"Who is Thumper?" Cyrus inquired as he and Janet came into the living room. Everyone started laughing except Cleo. "Cleo, I take it you are Thumper."

"You guys are in sooo much trouble." Cleo looked around at her friends just daring them to say anymore about her nickname. "I'll tell you about it another time, right now we need to eat and get to The Lair."

The gang finished eating in silence. Cleo was wondering how the night was going to go. Max noticed her deep in thought and told her not to worry he wasn't

going to let Jared into the club for a while. "Thanks Max. There's nothing like having "More Muscle" as a big brother." Everyone laughed at Max as he flexed for everyone. That definitely lifted Cleo's mood.

The friends all decided that they would leave their cars at Cleo's and ride together in two vehicles; Cyrus, Cleo and Janet in Cyrus' BMW and Max, Joseph and Lisa in Max's Navigator.

As they headed for the door, the phone rang, Cleo didn't even think about just letting it ring. "Hello, this is Cleo." Her eyes went straight to Janet and Janet picked up the cordless in the kitchen to listen in. All they heard was malicious laughter.

Janet yelled, "GO TO HELL! Hang up, Cleo!"

Cleo slammed the phone down and turned away from everyone before one of them saw how much the phone call had bothered her.

Cyrus went to Cleo and laid his hand on her shoulder. She leaned into him and whispered, "I wish he'd just go away. It's getting worse; he's never called me like that before." Cyrus held her as long as she allowed him to, which wasn't for long. As Cleo pulled away from Cyrus, she told everyone, "Come on people we need to get to work."

* * * *

No one knew that Jared was watching them leave.

After everyone was gone Jared let himself into Cleo's home. *"Now for a little payback and a big warning,"* Jared thought to himself. *"Next I'll get even with that little Compton bitch."* What Jared wouldn't give to be a fly on the wall when they returned home.

Chapter 4

Cleo had just started to pour a drink when the song that had been playing when Jared attacked her came out of the speakers. She froze. Cyrus showed up at that moment and placed his hand lightly on her shoulder. "Come dance with me. Let me help you forget about Jared."

Cleo was all set to decline his offer when Janet yelled, "Go on Cleo, I got this covered."

Cleo sighed and followed Cyrus out onto the dance floor. When they started dancing everyone backed up a few steps and gave them some room. Cleo soon realized Cyrus was a really good dancer, and forgot where they were and that anyone else was around. She brushed her ass across him in rhythm to the music and was quickly reminded just how well endowed he was. Which of course brought the memories of them on her sofa that morning slamming through her brain.

"No fair Cleo!" he said in her ear as he grabbed her hips to stop her torture of him.

As the song ended, Janet got on the p.a. and announced that the owner called and said, "This round's on the house. Everybody say, Thank You Cleo and Cyrus!"

The crowd roared "Thank You Cleo and Cyrus!"

Cyrus grinned and shrugged his shoulders at Cleo as they left the dance floor. Cleo threw up her hands, blushing at the unwanted attention.

Janet stared at her and then fanned herself very dramatically. She burst out laughing, "Damn girl, you guys burnt it up out there!"

Cleo didn't have time to say anything to Janet before Max came stalking up to the bar. "Sorry Cleo, I tried to keep him out but he whined to the owner. Mr. Mysterious called me and told me if I liked my job, I was to let Jared in. He also told me he had informed the asshole to stay away from you while in and around The Lair." Max was not the least bit happy. "Hey Cyrus, do you know who the owner is?"

Cyrus looked at him, shrugged and shook his head. "My checks come signed by the same corporation as yours. I was called, offered the job and I took it."

"Yeah, we know the drill. We tried researching the corporation but got no where." Max was not getting any happier. Max had been trying to find out who the owner was since he started working there.

"Damn, Jared really knows how to screw up a good night," Janet was starting to get pissed and that wasn't good. She wasn't well known for keeping her temper in check. "Speak of the asshole and he shall appear." She glared at Jared as he walked towards the bar. Janet grinned as she noticed that Jared looked a little worse for wear. "Damn, guess the boys really worked him over last night."

Jared started to step up to the bar but before he got too close six of the biggest guys Cleo and Janet had ever seen stood up and blocked his way. Jared stopped dead in his tracks and yelled his drink order to Janet. Cleo was too busy watching the guy walking up behind Jared to listen to what he was ordering. He stood a head taller than Jared. Cleo nudged Janet in the ribs three times before she stopped staring at the stranger and looked at her.

"Who is that, and where did he come from?" Janet went back to staring and went dead silent. Cleo just looked at her and wondered where the smart mouthed Janet she knew and loved had gone.

"I have no idea, but he looks familiar." The girls both looked at him, then at Cyrus and back to the stranger again. "Brother?" They asked at the same time. They both looked at Cyrus.

Cyrus just looked at them and smiled. When the man put his hand on Jared's shoulder Cyrus said, "Hello brother."

Janet's mouth fell open and Cleo reached over and gently pushed her chin up with her index finger to shut it for her. When the man spoke, Janet thought she was going to melt into a puddle behind the bar. "Ciao, fratello." The deep timbre of his voice rumbled sensually through Janet's body.

Janet handed Jared his drink, never taking her eyes off Cyrus' brother. Jared grabbed his drink from her and took off as fast as he could. He wasn't sticking around any longer than he had to. He would get his chance to get back at Cleo soon enough.

Janet and Cleo forgot about Jared as soon as he took his drink from her hand. Turning their attention to Cyrus and his brother, Cleo nudged Cyrus. "Don't you think you should introduce everyone?" Cleo leaned in closer to him and whispered, "Hurry up, Janet is stunned into silence, which never happens and probably won't last too much longer."

Cyrus laughed as he looked at Janet and saw what Cleo was talking about, which made him laugh even harder. "Carlo this is Cleo and Janet. Ladies, my brother Carlo." Janet could only smile and nod.

Now Cleo was stunned. "What, Janet? You don't have an, *oh so lickable*, comment?" Cleo whispered. Janet could only shake her head, jabbing Cleo in the ribs to shut her up. She had no idea what was wrong but she couldn't speak. Cleo burst out laughing along with Cyrus.

Cyrus walked out from behind the bar and gave his brother a huge bear hug. Cleo realized Carlo wasn't taller than Cyrus. It was just his presence that made him seem larger. "Let's go to my office, it's not as loud in there."

As the guys walked away Janet grabbed Cleo's shirt and pulled her over the bar so they could watch them walk away. "Damn, that man is a god!" Janet couldn't get over her reaction to Carlo. "Hey Joseph, find Lisa and cover for Cleo and me. We're going out on the dance floor for some much needed tension relief."

Joseph went over and grabbed Lisa from one of the tables she was waiting on.

When the girls got on the dance floor, a song they both loved came on. "Perfect!" shouted Janet. While they were dancing, Janet noticed Jared edging closer to the floor and glaring at Cleo. Janet slid over to Cleo and danced around her to get closer to Jared. When they made eye contact, she glared at him, daring him to come closer. Jared knew he'd never get close to Cleo with Janet around, so he disappeared into the crowd again.

Cyrus and Carlo came out of the office and noticed Cleo and Janet on the dance floor. "Do they always take a break whenever they feel like it?"

Cyrus stood watching Cleo, remembering their time on the dance floor. "They dance to relieve stress. Makes for happy bartenders." Looking at his brother, Cyrus asked, "Do you think I am not doing my job, brother?"

Carlo shook his head no and grinned, "Just curious. Let's join them."

Janet felt hands settle on her hips and a man's body pull her close. Out of habit, she began to rub herself against whoever was behind her until she remembered about Carlo. She leaned her head back to see who it was. Carlo looked down at her and gave her the same sexy lop-sided grin Cyrus had given Cleo. Janet's head snapped up and caught Cleo and Cyrus laughing. "Very funny guys, just hilarious!" She started to laugh, too. She was not backing down from this man; she was going to have fun with it even if it killed her.

Carlo realized he was not going to be able to dance with Janet the way they were for very long without embarrassing them both. Frowning down at Janet, Carlo realized he had the urge to claim her as his. Shaking his head, he looked around the dance floor for a distraction.

"Hey Giorgio, there you are. Can you stick around until this little problem is taken care of?" Janet realized Carlo was talking to someone behind him.

"Oh yeah, wouldn't miss this for the world!"

Janet and Cleo looked at each other, stunned to realize they knew the Giorgio Carlo was talking with. They flew around Carlo and jumped on the huge man standing behind him.

"GIORGIO!" They both screamed as they jumped on him almost knocking him to the floor. "Where have you been?" He laughed as they hung off his neck, both of them planting a kiss on his cheeks.

"Easy you two, you're gonna kill me. I've been here and there. You know how it is."

"I take it you know these two," Carlo laughed as he watched the two girls.

"Are you kidding? You do realize you have a party animal working in a dance club right?" Cleo couldn't stop laughing. "He did some work for Janet's Dad a few years ago."

"Ahem...Giorgio?" The girls both looked over Giorgio's shoulders and saw a woman with dark brown hair staring at them. They both dropped from Giorgio's neck and stepped back to Carlo and Cyrus.

Giorgio pouted as the girls backed away. "Aw...ladies that's cold. You don't have to go!" He turned around and noticed the girl they were looking at and laughed.

"Don't mind us, we're old friends and we haven't seen him for a long time." Janet turned to go back to the bar when the woman said something catty. Cleo could feel Janet begin to bristle at the remark and knew she wouldn't say anything. She never got in between a woman and her man, it had happened to Janet too many times.

Cleo was even starting to get pissed herself. This woman didn't know when to shut up. She wasn't even as tall as Cleo and was so dainty she looked child-like. Cleo could tell she knew how to take care of herself, though. Cleo didn't care,

"Listen up, we apologized and that's the end of it. If you don't like it, I can show you where the front door is!"

"After what everyone has told me about the two of you I expected that out of her not you." The woman actually had the nerve to smile at Cleo.

Janet spun around and went to go after the woman when Carlo put his arm out and stopped her. She couldn't trust herself to calmly tell the woman she wasn't about to stick herself in the middle of her and Giorgio. If she opened her mouth now there was definitely going to be trouble.

"Now that's more like it," the woman looked at Carlo and Cyrus laughing.

"That's it! I don't know who you are but you have about two seconds to disappear or I'll happily show you the way out. It's your choice." Cleo glared at the woman and dared her to say something else.

While Cleo was yelling at the woman, Janet began to see a resemblance between Carlo, Cyrus and the woman. "Um...Cleo..." There was no way she was going to get her attention until Cleo was finished.

"Loyalty, I love that in a..."

Cyrus interrupted Caprice before she could finish her comment. "Uh...Cleo and Janet let me introduce you two to our sister. Cleo and Janet this is Caprice, Caprice, Cleo and Janet."

Cleo and Janet glared at the three siblings. "Oh wonderful, just wonderful! I shoot off my mouth for the first time in days and it's to yell at my boss' sister." Cleo and Janet spun around and headed back to the bar, listening to the three of them laugh.

"We're back, you two can go," Janet grumbled.

"Doesn't look like you two relieved much tension." Joseph noticed Janet and Cleo were practically seething.

"We'll explain later."

Lisa let the girls know that she saw Jared leave and that he didn't look the slightest bit happy, before she went back to waiting on tables.

"Good, one less pain-in-the-ass to deal with," Janet shot back.

Cyrus and Carlo came up and slowly sat at the end of the bar. The girls just looked at each other and rolled their eyes. Cleo asked Janet if she was going to see if they wanted a drink.

"Hell no, Cyrus can get whatever they want himself."

Janet and Cleo soon forgot about the two sitting at the end of the bar. The crowd was a good one and they lost themselves in working the people at the bar. They realized all too quickly the night was over when Cyrus got up and rang the last call bell.

As the last of the crowd left, Cleo and Janet were cleaning up with Caprice sitting at the bar. Janet was not happy and Cleo had no idea what to do to lighten the mood. It didn't help that all Caprice could do was sit there and smile like nothing had happened. Hell, even she wanted to snatch her up by the hair and slap her.

When they were getting ready to leave Carlo asked Janet to ride with him and Caprice.

"She is riding with us." Cleo wasn't about to let Janet get in a car with Caprice. The two had glared at each other all night. She didn't know what Janet would do stuck in a car with Caprice.

Everyone followed Cyrus and Cleo back to her house. Joseph, Lisa and Janet needed to get their cars. Before they even pulled up to the house Janet jerked up and yelled, "What the hell!? Someone trashed my car!"

Janet jumped out of the car before Cyrus even had it parked. There was her baby, 1969 Ford Mustang that she had helped restore, with the windows shattered and all four tires slashed. "I smell Jared all over this. I'm going to kill him!" She ripped open the trunk and grabbed a tire iron. "Max, let's go!"

Carlo grabbed the tire iron before she got past him. "You want it, keep it, I don't need it!" She started to go around him to get to Max's SUV when he caught

her around the waist and pulled her to him. It was going to take a lot to get her to calm down.

When Carlo finally let her go she went back to her car kicking what was left of the tires yelling, "That no good, slimy, son of a bitch! I'm gonna gut him and enjoy doing it." Well at least Caprice finally saw Janet in all her raging glory. She got control of herself when Carlo grabbed her again and held her tightly.

"I'm sorry he did this to you, Janet."

"I've always hated that jerk. Now, I don't care what Mr. Mysterious says, if Jared has the balls to show up at The Lair again I'm going to cut 'em off." Cleo noticed Janet said that a little too calmly. That had warning flags popping up all over the place.

Carlo looked at Cyrus with an "Oh shit" look on his face. Cleo caught it but only for a second before she took off for her house. Once inside she looked at the wreckage that used to be her living room.

Her stereo was in pieces all over the room, and he had painted the word mine on every wall. Her kitchen looked as if the cabinets had exploded, sending food and dishes all over the place. When she got to her bedroom, she nearly collapsed at the sight of the mess. Her mattress had been slashed, along with most of her clothes.

Cyrus heard Cleo start screaming as he headed to the door. She knocked him out of the way, as she went running towards Max. She quickly spun and snatched the tire iron from Carlo.

Cyrus was on her in a heartbeat. "This is exactly what he wants you to do. Come to him. Don't do it Cleo." Cyrus swung her around and held her to him gently cradling her head to his chest.

Cleo, listening to his voice and the steady beat of his heart in her ear, dropped the tire iron at their feet. She couldn't figure out how he could make her feel safe and calm with just his touch and a few words. "He trashed my house, Cyrus." She sobbed into his chest. He held her until she got control of herself again.

"You obviously can't stay here tonight," Caprice said as she stood next to Cleo.

"She can stay with me," Janet snapped at her still looking at Cleo's house. Carlo lowered his hand to the small of her back. "Sorry, I didn't mean to bite your head off, Caprice."

"Cyrus, you better go in with Cleo so she can get some clothes and whatever else she needs. I'll send a few men over to keep an eye on the place." Carlo couldn't believe the little weasel, Jared, had the guts to pull something like this. He also wondered since he'd trashed Janet's car if he had trashed her place like he had Cleo's. He kept that thought to himself.

Carlo and Caprice followed Cyrus and the girls to Janet's place. When Janet got out of the car, she told Cleo to stay put until she checked things out. She had been thinking Jared had probably been there too on the drive over. Carlo appeared at her side as soon as she stepped away from the car. The next time anyone saw them Janet was carrying a gym bag and Carlo had a suitcase.

When Cleo got out of the car, she noticed Janet was boiling mad. "He got you too, huh?" Janet could only nod her head. She didn't trust herself to speak.

Cyrus told them both that they were staying with him and that they weren't going to argue with him. Carlo followed them to Cyrus' house.

Cleo and Janet couldn't believe their eyes when they pulled up to his house. The house, if you could call it that, was two full stories and an attic that a family could live in and never be heard it seemed.

A low whistle escaped from between Janet's teeth. There was a huge stone wall that surrounded the property with a massive iron gate at the entry onto the estate. "When you said home I was thinking bachelor pad not an estate."

There were great white pillars that went straight to the roof in the front and the arched double door entrance was spectacular. Palladian windows set to the right and left of the front doors. The quoins at the corners of the looming estate, gave it the look of a medieval castle. Cleo just stared out the window, not believing what she was seeing.

"It is actually my parents' home. When I told them I was coming here, they told me to take it and enjoy it. They do not get here as often as they would like to anymore," Cyrus told the girls as he pulled up to the front door.

Carlo grabbed the girls' bags as Cyrus led them into the house. Once everyone was inside, Janet told them to point her to a bed, that she was drained and if she didn't show up for coffee in the morning to send a search party. Carlo and Caprice took her unspoken hint and took her up the curving staircase to the bedrooms, leaving Cyrus and Cleo alone.

Cleo turned to Cyrus, "I have a sneaking suspicion we were just set up."

"I do not doubt it. So, do you want the fifty cent tour or do you want to wait until tomorrow?"

"I just want to clean up and try to get some sleep. Maybe in the morning tonight will seem like just a bad dream." Cleo wasn't ready to be away from Cyrus but she knew she needed sleep and the sooner the better.

Cyrus led her upstairs to a bedroom. He entered the room and turned on the bedside lamp for her. She couldn't believe the size of the room. The fireplace to the right was bigger than her entertainment center. There was a small sitting area with a sofa and two chairs around the fireplace. The whole room was bigger than her living room. The room was done up in shades of burgundy and cream, with a king sized bed that had burgundy curtains that closed around the bed keeping the occupant in dark, warm privacy. "Well at least it isn't black." When she looked at Cyrus, he was laughing, shaking his head. When he went over to close the drapes she asked, "Please leave them open, I like to see the stars while I'm falling asleep." She turned the lamp off and joined him at the window.

"Jared isn't going to give up is he?"

Cyrus put his arm around her shoulder and pulled her close. "No."

With a slight shrug, she pulled away and led him to the door. "Thanks Cyrus, I really appreciate all you're doing for Janet and me. Good night."

Cyrus walked out into the hallway, "I want you and Janet to stay here tomorrow night too, at least until we can get your homes in order and set up some protection for you. Good night, Cleo."

Cleo figured she would talk to Janet before she gave him an answer. She closed the door and returned to the window. "I know you're out there, Jared. Show yourself."

* * * *

When Sunday morning came, Cleo let her nose lead her to the coffee. She found Caprice and Janet glaring at each other over matching cups, and Carlo trying to dissolve into his seat. Cleo chuckled at him, "Coward." He nodded emphatically. She shook her head, "Come on you two, get over it already. You have poor Carlo shaking in his loafers over here."

Carlo shook his head slowly not wanting attention drawn to him. Caprice and Janet turned their heads slowly to glare at Carlo. "Oh no, you aren't dragging me into this." He took a sip of his coffee, mumbled something about finding Cyrus, and took off as if Lucifer himself was hot on his heels.

"How was your room, Janet?" Cleo asked her after Carlo had fled.

"Are you kidding, it's bigger than my entire apartment!" Janet laughed.

Caprice told them that she hoped they slept well and that Cyrus wanted to see them when they were through with breakfast.

They spent the day getting a tour of the estate, it was spectacular. One good thing is that there was no black anywhere except on a few decorative touches. She loved the pool and the pool house was bigger than her own house. The grounds were remarkable. They seemed to go on forever. The yard to the right of the pool area was like the size of two football fields that ended in a huge stand of beautiful trees. They listened to Carlo and Cyrus tell childhood stories, mostly about Caprice and of how they used to tease her. Janet thoroughly enjoyed those stories and

Caprice looked as though she was going to slit someone's throat. Cleo liked to hear their stories even though it reminded her that she had no biological family to remember stories about. Max's family was great and they had their fair share of great stories but it wasn't the same. She was actually really laughing for a change and felt herself starting to relax with everyone.

She noticed a portrait, over the fireplace in the living room, of a couple that looked oddly familiar. "Who are they," she asked Cyrus.

"My parents."

Cleo continued to stare at the portrait trying to figure out why they looked so familiar. She gave up and went to bed.

Cleo wasn't quite sure what time it was when she actually fell asleep but she knew she hadn't been asleep long when she heard Jared prowling around making all sorts of noise. Thankfully, she slept in sweats just in case she had to get up and move fast.

She jumped out of bed and just missed knocking Cyrus over as she bolted from her room. He caught her around the waist as he told her Jared was outside.

"I know."

Cleo saw Janet barreling from Carlo's room down the hall. She blocked the hallway and yelled at Janet, "STOP!" Carlo was right behind Janet spouting Italian, and Cleo was pretty sure they weren't terms of endearment he was yelling.

Janet told her she was either really brave or really stupid to step in her way when she was ready for a fight.

"You aren't going out there Janet, for any reason. He isn't alone and you know it."

"I'm not alone either, look around Cleo. I am not staying in here when that asshole is out there. I'm going to jerk a knot in his ass tonight, literally." Janet was just itching to get her claws into Jared, just a small payback for her car and Cleo.

Carlo was still ranting in Italian.

"English, speak English. You might as well be talking to yourself for all the good it's doing ranting in Italian." Janet was getting more aggravated the longer he went on. He shut his mouth then opened it again as if to say something else and decided against it. "And don't even think about telling me not to go out there. I've wanted a piece of Jared Braden for a long time now; I'm definitely getting it tonight one way or another."

Cleo grabbed Janet and pulled her farther down the hall. "Janet, what were you thinking? You just met Carlo and you jump right into bed with the man? Are you crazy?"

"Why not? This isn't really the time to be discussing my sex life anyway. In case you have forgotten the wolves are on the front lawn, we're out in the middle of nowhere so no neighbors are going to be calling the dog-catcher any time soon."

Cyrus, Carlo and Caprice were having the same conversation at the other end of the hall. "She is the one guys, I know it." Carlo was trying to convince Cyrus and Caprice that he had found his soulmate. He gave up and reminded them of their situation.

As they approached, Cleo told them they needed to call Max and Joseph before they did anything. As if on cue they heard another person arrive, this time it was Max. "Speak of the devil." Janet's face lit up immediately, she knew everything was going to be all right.

Chapter 5

Jared sat outside Cyrus' estate waiting on them to go to sleep. He could smell Cleo from where he sat on the edge of the property. The longer he sat there the more his rage took over. "I'll teach that asshole to touch what's mine. I'll teach that bitch I'm the only one that will be touching her the rest of her miserable life, and believe me, I will make it miserable," he sneered.

Fulk noticed the change in Jared before anyone else. He grabbed the guys and pulled back from him. They needed to stay out of his way for a while. Jared was unpredictable when he was worked up about something. Hell, he was unpredictable all the time, it was just worse when he was pissed off. Jared let out a yell that froze even Fulk's blood.

They were making their way over the wall in the back where they would be hidden by the trees. They saw Max and Joseph before they heard them. "Great, just what we need, Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum," Leo grumbled.

Cleo's cell phone rang; she ran to the bed and picked it up from the side table. "It's Lisa." Lisa told her she was on her way up the drive.

"Since Max and Joseph are here you're all staying put in Cleo's room until this is over. I mean it, Janet." Carlo wasn't taking no for an answer. Janet glared at him but didn't move from Cleo's door. Cleo was in shock; Janet was actually going to listen to him.

"Just be careful, we know how Jared operates. Watch each other's backs, especially Joseph. They'll probably try for him first." Cleo didn't want to see anyone go out there. *"This is all my fault, I should have done something, when all this started, to stop it."*

Janet looked at Cleo as Carlo took off down the stairs after Cyrus. "Don't even start blaming yourself for this. This has nothing to do with you and everything to do with Jared being an asshole. He was born this way, even as a little kid he was an asshole."

Lisa came running up the stairs just before Caprice shut and locked the bedroom door. The girls ran straight to the window. What they saw out on the lawn shocked them all. The full moon made it possible for them to see just about everything as if it was daytime. The guys were pushing Jared and his crew toward the woods to get them as far from the house as possible before the fighting started. There were eight men stalking around each other. When Cleo saw Cyrus in the moonlight she nearly fainted. He looked spectacular in the moonlight.

Cleo turned from the window and walked over to the sofa by the fireplace and sat down. She curled her legs up under her and laid her head on the back of the sofa. She then realized how attached she had become to Cyrus.

"Why does Jared have to pull this shit now? He's had months to do something stupid. Why now?"

Janet looked at Caprice and Lisa shaking her head. "You are thick aren't you? Jared didn't have any competition before, now he does. He thinks he's alpha dog. He's going to find out he isn't."

"What do you mean competition? He's had competition from day one, every other male on the planet." Cleo couldn't imagine what Janet was thinking. Then Cyrus flashed through her mind. Her eyes grew three sizes larger and she realized what she hadn't seen before. "Soulmates?"

"Give that girl a prize, she's finally figured it out." Janet looked at Lisa and laughed.

"Did all of you know it?" Cleo looked at the three women standing in front of her. She couldn't believe that it would be that obvious to everyone but her. Caprice sat down on the sofa and told her that everyone had seen it the minute they saw the two of them together.

The girls heard the sounds of fighting, closer to the house this time. They ran back to the window to see what was going on, as all hell broke loose on the lawn below them. Cleo saw Fulk lunge at Cyrus as Joseph went for Jared. She couldn't look away from the sight of the guys all fighting each other. She watched Joseph punch at Jared and cringed when he made contact with Jared's jaw. She had to turn away when she saw Fulk swing at Cyrus; she couldn't watch him be hurt because of her.

Cleo walked back to the sofa and sat down. She wrapped her arms around her legs and laid her head on her knees. Lisa followed her to the sofa and sat with her. "Cleo?"

She looked at Lisa. "I never believed in soulmates, certainly not in one for me. And how in the hell did everyone see it but me?"

Lisa held Cleo's hand while she talked. "You weren't expecting your soulmate so when he appeared in front of you, you didn't realize it. I don't think Cyrus is going to give you a choice on the subject. He's been stuck on you like glue from day one. Why won't you let yourself have what you want, Cleo?"

"Because I have never gotten what I want in my life. The only things that are good in my life are Max and his parents and you guys. I never knew my parents or anything about their past." Cleo laid her head back down on her knees and sighed, not letting herself cry for things she'd never had.

Janet had been so focused on Carlo and Drake that she almost missed Jared and Joseph go down. She saw the men come from the trees at the far side of the property. "Cleo, Lisa, come see this!" Cleo and Lisa rejoined Caprice and Janet at the window.

* * * *

Cyrus noticed three men hiding in the trees, armed with rifles. They were aimed on Jared; he didn't know it was tranqs they were going to shoot him with. He yelled a warning to Carlo and the rest of his unofficial group making sure they noticed the men.

Joseph was stalking in on Jared as two of the hidden men fired, hitting Jared square in the shoulder. Before Cyrus could warn Joseph, he was hit in the leg. Cyrus and Max cautiously crept to Joseph, taking in their surroundings as they went, not knowing what was going on.

One of the men walked up to Joseph and removed the dart from his leg. "Sorry Joseph, you'll be okay in about an hour. Jared isn't going to be bothering anyone again, especially Cleo. I can't believe that little ass thought he could pull something like this and I wouldn't find out about it."

Being nearly unconscious Joseph saw someone standing over him. "Mr. Braden?" Joseph realized the man standing over him was Jared's father. Before he could say anything else, everything went black.

Chapter 6

The girls came running from the house, watching as the men carried Jared to a black van parked just inside the wall of the estate. The man in the suit nodded towards them and walked to the van.

"Who was that? Where are they taking Jared?" Cleo couldn't figure out what was happening. "Where is Max?"

"I'm right here. That was Jared's dad and I don't know where they are taking him and don't care as long as it is far away from you." He walked over and started to pick up Joseph.

Leo, Mick, Fulk and Drake disappeared as soon as the men had come out of the woods. The only one who even noticed was Lisa. She couldn't believe Drake would willingly be involved with what just happened.

Cleo walked up to Cyrus. She grabbed his arm and made him turn around so she could check him over for any wounds. She didn't see anything serious but with his black clothes and the clouds that had moved over the moon blocking what light it had lent the scene, she couldn't really see very well.

Carlo walked up to Janet as she watched him. "What? You're not going to check for injuries?"

Janet gave Cleo a mischievous grin but turned her back to him. She was still a little peeved that he ordered her to stay inside while Jared and his goons were there. She was also still trying to figure out why she had actually listened to him.

Cyrus turned Cleo back around to face him. She threw her arms around his neck and held him as if he might disappear any second. He wrapped his arms around her, felt her trembling and tightened his hold on her. "Jared is gone and his father said he wouldn't be bothering you or anyone else again."

"I don't care about Jared. I was worried about you." She stood up on her tiptoes and pulled his head down to meet hers. She pressed her lips to his, kissing him, pouring all the fear and passion she had bottled up during the night into it.

He was shocked when she started kissing him but quickly recovered. She shook him to the core when she slipped her tongue between his lips slowly caressing the inside of his mouth.

She marveled in the taste of him, sweet and totally male.

"Get a room," Max whispered to them as he carried Joseph over his shoulder, following Caprice to the house.

Cleo pulled back and looked at Max; she had forgotten they weren't alone. She felt herself starting to blush and hid her face in Cyrus' chest. He slipped his hand into her lush blonde hair to cradle her head against him, sending tiny electrical pulses through her scalp down to her toes. She looked up at him, "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," he whispered to her as he grasped her hand in his. "Come with me." He led her to the pool house, never letting go of her hand. Once they were alone in the pool house, he pulled her to him. "Join me in the shower."

Standing there in his arms, she could feel his cock thicken in anticipation as he waited for her answer.

The sound of his voice and the feel of his breath on her ear sent moisture pooling between her legs until she could barely stand it. "Lead the way," she whispered to him.

Cyrus caught the scent of her heat and growled softly, deep in his throat. The sound of it sent a shiver of excitement down Cleo's spine. He looked at her and saw

streaks of silver dart through her beautiful sapphire eyes; he brushed his lips ever so softly across hers. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

She put her arm around his neck, running her hand up into his silky hair around to his cheek, gently rubbing the pad of her thumb across his bottom lip. "I'm sure."

He caught her thumb softly between his teeth and sucked it into his mouth, circling it with his tongue before letting go. He leaned in and captured her lips in a kiss that ran straight through her, touching places that hands never could. She realized that while they were kissing he had managed to get her to the bathroom. She hadn't even noticed they had been moving.

He let go of her long enough to start the shower. When he lifted his shirt up to take it off Cleo noticed the dark bruise on his side that ran around his torso. She reached her hand out and gently traced the path of the slowly forming bruise across his ribs to his back where it flared up his spine. She leaned in and placed a kiss on his spine where the bruise ended between his shoulder blades. She felt his skin ripple against her lips.

"We won't make it into the shower if you keep that up." He turned to face her and saw that she was crying. "What's wrong?" He followed her gaze to his chest and turned to see his back in the mirror over the sink. He drew her into his arms. "It doesn't hurt Cleo. I didn't even notice it until you pointed it out."

"If I..."

He cut her words off with a kiss. Pulling back he stated, "There are no If I's.' What happened tonight was not your fault. Jared came here because he wanted to, not because you made him."

He started to undress her, slowly pulling off her t-shirt brushing his thumbs over her nipples as he raised it over her head. He slipped his fingers into the waistband of her sweats, into her panties, lightly grazing her thighs as he pushed both sweats and panties down. He removed them one leg at a time, taking time to

caress the soles of her feet and her ankles. He slowly worked his hands back to her hips. He could feel her tremble as he caused goose bumps to rise on her legs.

He lifted his head and looked up at her. Her breath caught in her throat as his breath blew across her clit, causing her juices to flow. He grasped her hips, "I have to taste you, your scent is driving me crazy." He leaned in as he slid his hands down her hips to her thighs to open her up to him. He lightly brushed his tongue across her clit. She felt as if her legs were turning to rubber so she grabbed onto his shoulders for support. He drew her leg over his shoulder to open her up to him even more. She nearly collapsed when he thrust his tongue deep within her, and began to suck in her juices. "Mmmmm...sweet honey," he murmured against the lips of her pussy, sending shockwaves through her womb.

He stood up licking his lips. When she looked into his eyes she couldn't believe how much darker they were. They were almost black with just a few sparks of the chocolate brown in them.

Cyrus helped her into the shower. He started to slowly lather her up, paying special attention to all her sensitive areas. Cleo could hardly think. He was driving her crazy. She couldn't keep her hands off him any longer. She reached down and clamped her hand around his cock, shocked that she couldn't fit her fingers all the way around it. His head fell backwards as a soft groan escaped from deep in his throat. She was obviously doing something right. She grinned as she started to feel more confident and slid her hand up his shaft and rubbed her thumb across the head of his cock. A tremor passed through his body. Cleo let him go and began to lather her hands with soap. "Your turn."

The more her soft hands slid over his body the more intense his urge to have her became. He had to take her soon or he'd lose what little control he had. He didn't want their first time to be like that, he never wanted to hurt her.

He grabbed her thighs pulled her up and wrapped her legs around his waist. She was poised above his throbbing cock. She tried to slide down on him but he stopped her. He thrust forward just enough to spread her lips with the head of his

cock. She whimpered for more, but he took his time only thrusting in inch by inch, slowly until she couldn't take it anymore and began to wiggle her hips trying to take him in faster. "Be still, you're so damn tight," he groaned.

Cyrus froze, their first time should not be in the shower, she deserved better. He pulled out of her and shut off the water.

"What's wrong, what are you doing?" Cleo began to worry that he didn't want her after all.

He helped her out of the shower and began to dry her off. "I'll not take that from you like this. You deserve better. Our first time together should be slow and gentle in a warm bed."

"If you go any slower I'm going to die of old age!" she laughed.

He picked her up and carried her to the bed, laying her down on the massive pillows. She felt the silk comforter rub against her skin in a sensual caress as he lowered himself onto the bed over her. He nuzzled her neck as he slipped his knee between her legs. She spread her legs so he could rest between them as he began to tease her budding nipples into hard peaks.

When he slipped his hand down to her pussy and began to rub her clit with his thumb she thought she was going to come up off the bed. He slipped his finger into her warm sheath; he could feel her start to tighten around his finger. When he slipped a second finger in, she began to thrust her hips up, keeping up with the tempo he had set.

"Please Cyrus!"

He slipped his fingers out and licked them clean. He couldn't believe how sweet she tasted. He guided his cock to her creamy opening thrusting slowly so he didn't hurt her. Before he was completely sheathed in her, he stopped.

"Cyrus," she whimpered, "Now."

"I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't." Then she thrust her hips up to meet his until their hips met. The rush of pleasure she felt when he finally filled her was indescribable. His thrusts were slow and gentle; he drove her to the edge and held her there.

"I can't take this much longer, you're so fucking tight it almost hurts."

"So what are you waiting for? Fuck me, hurry," Cleo pleaded.

She almost made him explode just uttering those words to him. He started to bury himself deep within her, harder and faster each time. She was thrusting her hips up to meet him, driving him closer to the edge. When her muscles began to tighten around his cock he could barely move, the feeling was so exquisite. He tried to draw out but she began to squeeze his cock so hard he couldn't hold it off any longer. She shattered into a million little pieces as he thrust into her one last time grinding her clit against him as she screamed his name.

He threw his head back and groaned as he emptied his seed into her. She milked him dry as her aftershocks rumbled through her and he felt every one of them clear down to his toes.

He collapsed onto the bed being careful not to crush her. "That was magnifico!" He kissed her with all the love he felt for her, but was too afraid of her reaction to speak the words.

She couldn't believe how she was feeling. She couldn't love this man this soon. She'd only known him for a short time but couldn't see her future without him in it. His kiss reached down deep and curled her toes. She thought about Lisa's question of why she wouldn't let herself have things she wanted. Well, she wanted this man with all her soul. "I love you, Cyrus," she whispered in his ear. She almost hoped he wouldn't hear her. She didn't want to rush him or scare him away, but if what everyone was saying was true, it wouldn't matter.

Cyrus felt like all the air was sucked out of the room. He couldn't believe she'd actually said those three little words to him. He looked down at her and smiled, "I love you too, sei la mia anima gemella."

"What does that mean?"

"You are my soulmate." He kissed her hungrily, wanting to stay in the moment forever. He knew that wasn't possible but he could certainly keep her with him for the rest of their lives. That was exactly what he would do as soon as possible.

"Do you really believe in soulmates, Cyrus?" Cleo held her breath waiting for his answer.

"Yes, I do. After growing up watching my parents, there can be no other explanation for what they have. Why? Don't you?" He looked at Cleo's face and felt mesmerized at the way her eyes sparkled from the moonlight streaming through the window.

"I had given up on there actually being a soulmate out there for everyone. Until tonight, watching you out there in the moonlight protecting me from Jared, I couldn't imagine you not being in my life."

Chapter 7

Cleo woke up to someone yelling her name. She couldn't understand why someone was telling her their parents were coming. Finally waking up she realized that it was Caprice.

"Cyrus! Wake up! Caprice is calling for us."

Cyrus reached over and pulled her closer to him so he could snuggle into her neck when he heard Caprice yelling for him.

"Cyrus, Cleo, where are you? Mama and Papa are coming!" Caprice yelled for them to hurry.

Cyrus sat up the same time Cleo did. "Did she say your parents were coming?" They flew out of bed searching for their clothes. Cyrus just nodded as he threw her clothes at her.

Caprice came running in just as they were heading for the door. "Hurry, they are coming up the drive." Caprice went running back out towards the main house, reminding them to hurry.

"Why didn't you tell me your parents were coming today?" Cleo couldn't believe that she was going to meet Cyrus' parents today. She just wished she had time to clean up and calm down a little bit before the actual meeting.

"I had no idea they were coming here, they did not tell me." He was rushing her out the door, hoping they would make it to the main house before his parents came in. "I cannot believe they are here, today of all days."

Cyrus was wondering what they were doing there as he entered the patio door at the same time his father came in the front door. Cleo was behind Cyrus trying to get her hair combed out.

"Well Cyrus, you're up early this morning." Cleo knew that voice but it couldn't be who she thought it was. "Who is your friend there with you son, aren't you going to introduce her?" Cyrus' father began to laugh.

Cleo knew that laugh. "Cordy?" Cleo peeked out from behind Cyrus to see if it was who she thought it was. "Cordy, is that you? Where is Sandy?" Cleo could not believe these two were Cyrus' parents.

"Yes it's me, and you had better get over here and give me a hug, little one!" Cleo ran around Cyrus and flew into Cordy's arms. "It has been too long, little one. How have you been?"

"Fine, Fine. Where is Sandy?"

"I am right here, dear. Now where is my hug?" Sandy came up beside her husband to give Cleo a long overdue hug.

Cyrus could only stare in confusion and disbelief at Cleo and his parents. "Cyrus, close your mouth, son, you look like you have taken leave of your senses." His father stood there laughing at him.

"I saw the portrait and thought there was no way it could be you two," Cleo started to laugh. "I can't believe this. How have you been, where have you been?" Before they could answer her questions, Carlo started laughing.

"So she is *Little One*? This is too much." Carlo laughed harder. "Cyrus you don't remember Little One, do you?"

Cyrus shook his head, "No, I don't, should I?"

"We will talk about it later, I am sure. Mom, Dad, this is Janet." Janet came out from behind him to meet his parents. "Janet, this is Corrado and Alessandra Giordano, my parents." Carlo said as he introduced them to each other.

"Hello, nice to meet you." Janet smiled as they hugged her. Cleo laughed and nudged Cyrus as she caught the look on Carlo's face. When Cleo and Cyrus nodded to him, he grinned.

Max chose then to saunter into the room. "What is all the yelling about, and whose parents are coming?" When he saw Cordy and Sandy, "What are you two doing here?"

"We are the parents who have arrived."

"Whose parents?"

Cleo smiled at Cordy and Sandy, "Allow me." She waved her hand toward Cyrus, Carlo and Caprice then at the portrait. "Max, let me introduce you to their parents." She couldn't hold back the laughter as Max's jaw dropped.

"Now you look just as daft as Cyrus. Close your mouth, son." Cordy started to laugh and hugged Cleo again.

Cordy and Sandy led everyone into the living room so they could sit down. Once everyone was seated, they began to explain everything. Cordy told them about finding Cleo out front of the estate when she was just a baby. He didn't go into detail about it but Cleo decided she would ask him more about it later when she could get him alone.

Cleo didn't want to interrupt him. Cyrus was sitting on the floor between her feet, so she leaned down and whispered to him that she needed coffee.

"Hold that thought, Cleo needs coffee."

His mother told him that she had already taken care of it, and that it should be there any minute. Cleo thanked her.

While Cordy talked she played with Cyrus' silky hair. She froze as soon as Cordy started talking about her and Cyrus as children. Cyrus looked up at her and grinned. He was telling Caprice how Cleo had punched Cyrus in the nose when he was eight years old. "A boy had pulled Cleo's pony tail and Cyrus beat him up. All he got out of it was a punch in the nose from Cleo."

Cyrus looked up at her and laughed as she grabbed the top of her head and blushed. "I had forgotten all about that. That must be why you seemed so familiar." In the next moment, she was smacking him on the head. "You're how I got the nickname Thumper."

"What are you talking about? I seemed familiar?" Cyrus said as he looked up at her.

"That first night you showed up at the club, I kept thinking there was something familiar about you. I just blew it off, thinking I was nuts." She laughed as he shook his head.

"So you were the ungrateful brat who punched me in the nose." Cyrus looked up and gave her that lop-sided grin and she started to laugh. "We will discuss that punch in the nose later, and how is it my fault they nicknamed you Thumper?" There was a sparkle in his eyes that made her toes curl.

"I only punched you in the nose because I wanted to beat the kid up myself and you didn't let me. They started calling me Thumper after I popped you in the nose. Then when someone would start to mention it again, I would thump them. Hence, the nickname Thumper. Thanks, by the way."

"Well it certainly took you two long enough to find each other again," Cordy winked at Cleo and Cyrus.

"It would have saved them both a lot of trouble if someone would have told them ahead of time," Janet grumbled to Carlo.

"Yes, it probably would have but Cyrus wouldn't have had the chance to be Cleo's difensore again," Cordy smiled at them.

"What does that mean?"

Cordy looked at her and said, "It basically means defender."

"After I beat that boy up for pulling her hair they teased me for weeks calling me, her *difensore*." Cyrus just shook his head at his father and grinned.

"You have no idea what she's been through! You could have prevented it." Janet was getting pissed. Who did this guy think he was? Carlo put his arm around her and hugged her.

"I know about everything, even Jared."

Everyone surged to their feet. "What!"

"Who is Jared? What happened, Corrado?" Sandy was starting to sound upset.

"Everybody sit down and I will tell you what you want to know." Once everyone had taken their seats, Cordy apologized to Cleo before he said anything else. "Jared's father is a friend of mine. He called me when all this trouble started but he did not say who the girl was just that she worked at The Lair. I should have known something was going to happen when Jared started calling me."

"It's you! You are the one who called me that day about Jared not getting in the club. You own the club?" Max was livid. "How could you even stand that little cockroach?"

"He never told me the girl's name, and I did not think to ask. I had no idea it was Cleo until it was too late."

Sandy asked her husband about the club. She couldn't believe he had kept something like this from her. "We are going to have a long talk about all this later, Corrado Giordano." Cordy knew that it wasn't going to be a pleasant conversation from the tone of her voice.

"Come with me girls, we have some things to talk about." Sandy led them out the door onto the terrace. She gave her husband a look that made the hair on the back of his neck stand on end as she went out the door.

Cyrus was still trying to process everything he had just learned. "How could you do that to her? You could have told us about your suspicions and avoided everything that has happened in the past few days. She blames herself for all of it! She thinks if she would have done something differently Jared would not have done the things he did."

Cordy apologized again for everything. "I wished I would have done things differently but I do not think it would have changed the things Jared did."

Sandy came stomping up to him, telling the boys to get out. She started yelling at him in Italian. The girls stopped at the door and backed up slowly motioning for the guys to come outside. They could hear her out on the terrace still ranting in Italian.

"That woman scares me," laughed Janet. "She doesn't pull any punches."

Cleo was laughing, too, "I have no idea what she's saying. I'm just glad I'm not her target."

The guys just stood there staring at the door. Caprice was grinning at Cleo and Janet, knowing what her mother was saying. Whatever she had just said had Cyrus and Carlo looking a bit green.

"Caprice, what did she say?" Cleo couldn't hold back the laughter as she looked at the two brothers.

"She mentioned something about having him neutered." All the girls laughed at that. The guys just looked at them like they were crazy. "She also told him he was giving us the club."

"What?" Janet and Cleo both asked.

"She told him he was going to turn the club over to us. We are going to be the owners. That will make you Cyrus' boss, Cleo."

"Oh, this is going to be so much fun. Speaking of the club, Max where is Joseph?"

"He told me to thank you for the bed, and then he took off as the sun was coming up." Max shook his head and turned away.

"Well it is time for us to get to work." Cyrus grabbed Cleo as he headed inside to get his keys.

"We are heading to the club. See you later. Bye." Cyrus didn't stop as he grabbed his keys and practically dragged Cleo out the door with everyone else quickly following, getting away from his parents as quickly as possible.

Chapter 8

When they arrived at work, they found a message from Joseph. He told them he was taking a few personal days and that he would talk to them when he got back.

Cleo and Janet were busier than usual. "Where'd all these people come from?" Cleo then saw Cordy and Sandy walking in followed by Mr. Braden, Jared's father. A cold chill ran through her. She knew something was very wrong.

"Why would they bring *him* here?" Janet asked as Cleo and she watched them walk into the office.

Cyrus and Carlo came out of the office to tell Janet and Cleo that they were wanted in the office and to take over tending bar for them. As Cleo and Janet got to the office, they noticed Caprice was already there.

Sandy stood and reached for Cleo as she came in. "I'm so sorry, Cleo."

Cleo looked at her in confusion.

Mr. Braden approached her and told her that she had better sit down. She didn't like where the conversation seemed to be heading and neither did Janet. "Jared disappeared from the house early this morning and I have not been able to reach him anywhere. I have called everyone I could think of but no one has seen him or they are not saying anything. I do not think he will be stupid enough to come after you again."

Cleo only half listened to what he said as she stood up and walked over to Cordy. "What do we do now?"

He told them he had people out looking for Jared and that he had called in extra security for the club and the house.

"What about our homes?" Cleo couldn't stay at their home forever, Janet agreed. They both wanted to go home and soon.

"Everything is cleaned up and taken care of. The two of you are staying with us until Jared is located. Besides Cyrus and Carlo would have a fit if we let you go home now." The look on Sandy's face said she was not to be argued with.

The girls could only nod at her as she gathered them in her arms and hugged them.

Caprice couldn't believe what was going on. "None of his friends know where he is? I can't believe that, someone knows where he is."

Cleo looked over at her and told her she would talk to Lisa. Maybe she'd be able to find out if Drake knew anything about Jared. Cleo doubted it, but it was worth a shot.

"Cleo, you and Janet need to come back to the house with us so we can keep you safe. There are too many people here to properly protect you." Cordy was more worried than he let on.

"I will NOT be forced into hiding by Jared or anyone else. I will not give him control over my life," Cleo hissed between clenched teeth.

"But Cleo..." Sandy began.

"I'm sorry Sandy, but I'm not changing my life because Jared decided to make me his latest obsession."

She knew Cyrus was going to come unglued when he found out what she was doing. She'd have to deal with that when the time came, but right now, she was going back to work and finishing her day as she usually would. Well she was going to try anyway.

Janet and Cleo walked back to the bar. Cyrus saw the looks on their faces and knew something was wrong. "What is it?" Cyrus reached for her and she let him pull her into his arms.

She clung to him, trembling. "Jared is missing and no one seems to know where he is."

Cyrus tensed and hugged her tighter. "He will never get close to you again, Cleo. I promise," he told her as he pressed his lips to the spot just behind her earlobe.

She hugged him tighter and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Can you cover for me a little longer? I need to talk to Max." She let go of him as he nodded and let her go.

Max wasn't at his usual place by the door when Cleo got there. She looked around the club and then toward the doors when she didn't see him inside. She walked outside to see if he was out there for some reason.

"You shouldn't be out here by yourself." Cleo spun around and saw Giorgio standing there frowning at her. "You were told to stay inside Cleo. We can't very well protect you if you don't listen to what we say."

"Sorry Giorgio, but I need to talk to Max. Have you seen him? I can't find him anywhere."

"Go back inside, we'll find him." Giorgio grabbed his radio and told his crew to keep an eye out for Max.

Cordy and Sandy came outside and grabbed her. "You need to get inside and stay close to Cyrus. Lisa isn't here and we can't reach her anywhere either." Sandy took her hand and led her back inside.

Cleo went to the office to try calling Lisa and Drake. As she was hanging up the phone, Cyrus came in locking the door behind him. Cleo looked up from the phone and started to cry. He knelt beside her chair and took her in his arms. "I can't find Max or Lisa. Drake isn't answering his phone either."

"What if Jared has gotten to them?"

"Shhh, the guys will find them. You have to believe that. I do not have any idea where Max is but I would bet Drake is hiding Lisa somewhere safe."

"I hope you're right. Max missing worries me. He never leaves without telling one of us." She wrapped her arms around him holding him tight to her as if he would disappear if she let go. He slipped his arm under her legs and lifted her up, carrying her to the sofa in the corner of the office. He sat down with her on his lap, cradling her against his warm chest.

As Cleo came to rest on his lap, she felt his cock throb hard against her hip. Unable to stop herself, she squirmed deeper onto his long, thick bulge. She felt him shudder when she laid her hand on his chest above his heart, feeling the steady, calming beat begin to quicken. She felt his pulse quicken against her cheek when she nuzzled into his neck.

Cyrus gazed down at her, wondering how he was going to keep from ravishing her right there in the office if she didn't stop rubbing herself against his cock. He was at the very edge of his control as it was. He was soaking in the look of her nestled in his arms when he realized she was gazing up at him with complete trust in her eyes. He watched her pulse throb in the curve of her graceful neck, keeping time with his.

"I need you, Cyrus, now." She whispered, as she held him tighter.

He held her face gently between his hands, brushing his lips ever so softly over hers and began a soft, sensual exploration of her mouth. Tracing her mouth with the tip of his tongue, he felt her lips part in invitation. His warm tongue entered between her teeth so slowly she thrust hers to meet his drawing him in. Their tongues danced together in a slow tango of enticement. Cleo felt his hand slide up to softly hold her breast as his thumb flicked over her throbbing nipple, through her shirt. She felt the small growl crawling up her throat but had no power to stop it as he devoured it with his kiss.

She arched into his touch, needing more than he was giving. With the next flick of his thumb, she felt a twinge in that nerve that seemed to run from her nipple straight to her clit, making her damp with need.

Cyrus broke off the kiss to trail small kisses to her ear. He felt her tremble each time his breath blew over her ear in short gasps. Before he could stop himself he whispered, "Mine." He froze; he didn't want to rush her.

Cleo looked into his eyes and said, "Yours." She decided to take the initiative and rubbed her hips across his thick bulge as she started to pull his shirt from his waistband.

Cyrus reached down and gently clasped her hands in his. He couldn't believe she had just said that. He felt his heart swelling with love, until he was sure it was going to burst from his chest. "Are you sure you want to do this, here?"

Cleo didn't want to wait, she couldn't get the cold feeling out of her soul and she wanted it gone if only for a little while. Cyrus was the only thing that warmed her anymore. She kissed him long and hard, whispering the word "Mine" into his mouth as she drew back.

Cyrus was lost; he couldn't have stopped now if he wanted to. He sat her down on the sofa and began to undress her slowly. She quickly tore his shirt up and off his body; she couldn't wait to feel his warm skin against hers. He laid her back on the sofa and quickly stripped the rest of their clothing away. His gaze ran over her body in long sweeps drinking in her beautiful curves realizing that she was definitely his.

He slipped his knee between her thighs and she opened herself to him. She ran her hands up his chest to nestle in his hair pulling his head down to her. She devoured his mouth in a kiss that he felt deep in his soul.

He pulled back, breaking the kiss, so he could bury his face in her neck. He nipped her neck sending shivers of sensual pain through her just before he eased the ache with a soft lick of his tongue. He left a trail of burning kisses to her breasts where he gently caught a nipple between his teeth driving her closer to the edge of reason. She felt the light scratch of his five o'clock shadow as it grazed her skin sending heat through her, as he moved to suckle her other breast.

When she didn't think she could take anymore he nestled himself between her legs. She felt him guide his cock to her heat, slipping into the entrance of her gently. When she couldn't take it any longer, she thrust her hips upwards, burying him to the hilt in her warm tight sheath.

He moaned. "You're so damn tight. Don't move, or I won't be able to last long."

Cleo giggled and began to wiggle her hips just enough to force him to start long, slow thrusts dragging her closer to the edge of control. His thrusts became faster and harder, she felt her eyes begin to tingle.

Just as he lowered his head to her shoulder, she lifted her head and nipped his shoulder where it began to curve up to his neck. They both tensed as their orgasms came together causing the tightening of her sheath around his throbbing cock, and his seed to explode deep within her. Her body milked him with every aftershock of sheer bliss that ran through her.

"Mine" they both gasped as they collapsed into each others arms completely sated. She could not believe she had just made love to him in the office of The Lair, and on the couch of all places. He hugged her tighter as if reading her thoughts.

Cleo looked up at Cyrus, he was grinning as if everything was right in the world. Her head was spinning, not knowing if she was comfortable with him being so smug. "Not the most romantic place, but it does not matter. I would gladly make love to you anywhere you wanted." He kissed her with a tenderness he hadn't known he possessed.

"I think I could get used to this," Cleo giggled.

He started handing her the clothes she had been wearing as someone knocked on the door. It was Janet and she sounded upset. They threw their clothes on and Cyrus opened the door. He could feel the tension in the club.

Janet ran to Cleo. "They've found Max. He's in really bad shape. Jared and his boys must have ganged up on him." She sank onto the sofa sobbing.

Cleo reached out for Cyrus as her legs melted out from under her. He caught her and sat her with Janet. "Where is he?" she choked out around the lump that had risen in her throat.

Carlo walked in and went straight to Janet. "Dad made a few calls and had him taken to the house," he told them as he sat down and gathered Janet in his arms.

Cleo finally found her legs and stood up. "We need to go now." She grabbed Janet and Cyrus and headed for the door.

When they got outside she asked for the keys and Cyrus said, "Absolutely not, I will drive."

"Fine! Just get us there fast." Cleo jumped in the passenger seat before Cyrus even got his door open.

When they entered the house, she headed straight for the stairs, not knowing in what room Max was. Cleo felt the bile rise in her throat, fighting it down, starting to feel the familiar pangs of guilt building in her stomach. Sandy met her at the top of the stairs.

"He is awake and alert but in a lot of pain. He wants to see you, Cleo."

Cleo ran to his room with Cyrus on her heels. When she entered, she nearly collapsed. The sight of him bandaged from head to toe, with blood seeping from some of them, ripped her heart out. She walked slowly to his bedside. "I'm sorry Max," Cleo began to cry.

"You have nothing to be sorry for," Max whispered. He sounded as if someone had tried to strangle him. He glanced from her to Cyrus and then rasped out, "What is this, you go off and get attached while I'm getting my ass kicked, what's the deal with that?" He tried to laugh causing his chest to hurt worse.

She noticed Caprice crying, smoothing back his hair when he started coughing. She realized then that Caprice may be just what Max needed right now.

Everyone looked at her and Cyrus, gaping like fools. She began to laugh through her tears. "Max, you really are going to be okay?" Cleo asked when she heard him joking with her.

“You know it, kiddo.”

The next thing Cleo knew she was spinning around in Cordy’s arms. “Little One, it is about time!” He was laughing and crying, as was everyone else, except Cyrus who was beaming with pride.

After everyone had congratulated them beyond reason, Cleo and Cyrus finally got the chance to slip outside. Once outside they went to sit by the pool. “I need to try and reach Joseph. He needs to know about Max.” When she dug her cell phone from her pocket, she realized she had a message. It was from Joseph, telling her that he was dealing with Jared and to tell Max to get better. He said not to worry anymore everything was going to be all right. He would try to call her in a few days.

Epilogue

Later by the pool, Cyrus held Cleo in his arms. "I love you, and I will never let anyone hurt you again." He leaned in and gave her one of his soul scorching kisses.

As they drew back for a small breath of air she looked in his eyes and said, "I love you, too," as she tangled her hands in his hair. She leaned in and ran her hands down his back wrapping her arms around his waist snuggling into him. She had never felt safer then she did at that moment.

Cleo knew things were not over. There were still too many unanswered questions. No one knew where Joseph actually was and what had happened to Jared. But she was not going to let unanswered questions spoil the time she had alone with Cyrus. Tonight she was content just sitting in the moonlight in the arms of the man she loved just watching the water sparkle as the moonlight reflected off the surface of the pool.

THE END

